Best Practices and Peer-to-Peer Network

The National Environmental Performance Track
Improving the Achievement Track
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Introduction

Participants in this session discussed how to develop the Performance Practices Database and the Peer Exchange Network for the maximum benefit of Achievement Track members. There were 29 attendees total, four of whom were EPA officials, and 25 others representing 22 different companies or organizations. An EPA official provided opening remarks.

Purpose of Session

The purpose of the session was to discuss ways to facilitate information exchange among Achievement Track participants. The first half of the discussion addressed a web-based Performance Practices Database to facilitate information exchange; the second half on a Peer Exchange Network to share experiences, benchmark their performance, participate in onsite visits, and share information on successful implementation strategies among their peers. Participants were asked to discuss the types of information would be most useful, how information should be organized, and how contributions to the Performance Practices Database should be selected.

Performance Practices Database

Case Studies

The Performance Practices Database could be populated with case studies from participants or other credible sources. Areas of interest included:

- cost benefit analysis;
- compliance problems and solutions, including input from state agencies;
- particular pitfalls and problems encountered by various companies;
- components of an environmental management system; and
- examples of how EMSs have been implemented by individual companies.

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development Web site (http://www.wbcsd-org.ae.psiweb.com/) and its use of case studies was cited as a good example.

Selecting and Organizing Information

Participants suggested that case studies for the database could be made using a template located on the web site. People could click in and submit a case study or noteworthy practice directly over the web that could then be evaluated by a review panel. The process of accepting submissions could be driven by requirements such as covering a significant environmental issue, have a high rate of return, or demonstrate community outreach/involvement, etc. A second, higher tier of requirements could set apart even more notable practices.

Many felt that because the Achievement Track program has been recently established, it is important to encourage people to submit information rather than narrow down the information required for submission. There was general agreement that an effort should be made initially to accept all submissions, see whether the web site generates interest, and then determine how it should be used in the future.

Two ideas emerged on how to organize information. The first was to organize information by sector or member facility with links individual company Web sites. The second idea was to organize the information by subject area.

Suggested subject areas included: industrial processes; substances used by manufacturing and service processes; and environmental media. A robust search engine would be needed to facilitate information retrieval. Several participants indicated organizing information around the various industry types might be too specific and that much information might be missed under this approach.

Other Components

Additional database components that were discussed included: a "news" link connecting to emerging industry regulations and new products and product substitutions to aid in pollution prevention. Several participants indicated that an updated listing of all Achievement Track members and their contact information would be useful.

Finally, participants agreed that access to the Performance Practices Database should be open and available to the public so that those outside the Achievement Track can learn from and perhaps be encouraged to join the program. Some caution should be made with regard to access to sensitive materials.

Peer Exchange Network

The second part of the discussion centered on developing other networks for exchanging information. Participants indicated that weekly or biweekly electronic newsletters containing abstracts and links to web sites with news and information on regulations would be helpful, as would a contact list of members. Association conferences also were mentioned as a good forum to get the word out on the program.

Participants felt that while national meetings were beneficial, they were expensive and time consuming to attend. National conferences are most useful when they focus on a particular industry. In general, regional meetings were more affordable and accessible. Regional conferences present a valuable opportunity to interact with state staff to facilitate state interaction and enhance regional cooperation. Some regions have significant experience in best practices and facilitation while others may need help in developing information-sharing conferences.

Members would like to be aware of all conferences occurring on both a national and regional level in order to select conferences based on individual needs. There was general consensus from the group that on an annual basis members would, at most, attend one to two regional conferences and a national conference.

Additional Methods to Facilitate Information Transfer

A state participant suggested bringing together a work group of state, federal, and industry members to develop solutions where a particular regulation is troublesome or a technology is being developed that is not quite cost effective. The development of a forum for states to work with each other and to work with the EPA was also discussed.

An industry participant suggested that mentoring could be incorporated into the Peer Exchange Network and extend beyond simply recognizing achievement to bringing useful information to other industries. The VPP model was suggested as a good example of this mentoring approach.

There was a general consensus among participants that a small business component should be created for the Peer Exchange Network because small businesses may encounter more barriers to achievement.

It was agreed that an on-line discussion forum would encourage questions, problem solving, and issues to be stated and vetted among Achievement Track participants. This type of electronic discussion could be conducted using a bulletin board or list serve. A bulletin board, some said, would eliminate additional e-mail volume. However, a list serve has the benefit of being able to highlight the most recently posted questions.

Conclusion

The Best Practices and Peer-to-Peer Network Session generated a wide variety of ideas on how to improve information exchange and networking capabilities for Achievement Track members. At the close of discussion,

several participants stressed that they did not view the website and Peer Exchange Network resources as mutually exclusive. There appeared to be a consensus that the two should be used in tandem, using the website to post information and papers resulting from conferences and creating web casts and virtual forums from various Peer Exchange Network events.